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Arab Americans: Striving for Identity at Illinois

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### Abstract

On the US Census form, persons of Arab American or Middle Eastern descent are asked to check the “Not Hispanic, White” box. Although some Arab Americans do identify as white, many do not. This study investigated how two Arab American students at Illinois self-identify racially, what they think about their racial identity, and how they feel about checking the “White” box. The findings included three major themes: mixed feelings toward what to check for demographic purposes, positive perceptions of Arabs who identify as white, and a strong tie to the Arab American community and culture.

*“The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends. It is not our many Arab friends...No one should be singled out for unfair treatment or unkind words because of their ethnic background or religious faith.”-George W. Bush*

### Arab Americans: Striving for Identity at Illinois

“Whiteness” is not so much a biological construction as it is a social construction. Over the years, various ethnic groups have “become” white, such as Irish, Italian and Jewish persons (Barrett & Roediger, 2008). An expansive body of research has indicated the many privileges associated with this white identity in America (e.g. McIntosh, 1998; Lewis, 2003; Wildman, 2008). Minority groups inarguably suffer the consequences of white privilege on a daily basis. One gap, in the whiteness research, however, is whether or not all ethnic groups under the “white” label experience the same level of privilege (Neville et al, 2001). Arab Americans in particular, although asked to consider themselves “white” on demographic surveys, blatantly suffer many of the same disadvantages minority groups face, particularly following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Panagopolous, 2006). Very little research has been conducted that differentiates the Arab American experience from other white ethnic groups, because most research is conducted on whites as a whole. Should the Arab American experience prove to be considerably different, then it ends up being an ethnic group invisible demographically, as they are grouped into the broader “white” statistics. The lack of research opens up an endless number of possibilities to expand upon this topic.

Although Arab Americans are asked to check “white” for demographic purposes, some opt to self-identify as “other.” Ajrouch & Jamal (2007) explored this, to see what

factors were associated with assuming a white identity. They found that those who identified as Lebanese/Syrian, Christian, or those who did not identify as Arab American were more likely to assimilate into a white identity. Religious affiliation can also prompt deviation, so being Muslim American will increase the likelihood of rejecting the white status. Immigrants' successful assimilation into American culture is constrained by three factors: skin color, geographic location, and labor marker conditions. The researchers found that they will likely announce a white identity with four predictors. First, their immigrant status is a factor and those classified as a minority in their previous country will want to reject the minority label and embrace the white label. Next, their national origin contributes in that Lebanese/ Syrians have been immigrating the longest, and thus have begun to resemble those from other Mediterranean regions (Greece, Italy, Spain) that are more readily accepted as white. Thus, these groups are more likely to identify themselves as white and more willingly assimilate into the culture. Third, religious affiliation contributes and Muslims are more likely to reject their white status than are Christians. Finally, their level of perceived "Arab Americanness" plays a pivotal role, and those who have a strong ethnic identity are more likely to identify with the "other" category.

Panagopolous discusses the particular concern for research specific to the Arab American experience in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. The terrorist attacks triggered an Islamophobic reaction from people all over the country and world. Thus, do Arab Americans experience the same white privilege as their other white counterparts? In fact, more than 2,000 backlash incidents were reported against Arab and Muslim groups following the September 11 attacks. Additionally, favorable attitudes toward these groups

showed a significant decline from 2002-2004, also following the attacks. Clearly, September 11 was a critical point that marked a sense of discrimination and insecurity in Arab American people, suggesting a potentially different white experience for this ethnic group.

The Detroit Arab American Study (2004) provided quantifiable statistics to convey the anti-Arab sentiment two years following the September 11 terrorist attacks. With a sample size of 1,016 Arabs, 37% of participants identified themselves as from Lebanon or Syria, 35% from Iraq, 12% from Palestine/Jordan, and 9% from Yemen. There were 58% of participants who self-identified as Christian, and 42% who self-identified as Muslim. Two thirds (64%) of participants described themselves as “white,” while one third (31%) identified themselves as “other.” Seventy percent of the participants felt that the term “Arab American” accurately describes them. Here are the devastating findings: Fifteen percent of participants said following the attacks, they had a bad experience as a direct result of being Arab American. This could include anything from verbal insults, exclusion in the workplace, or the less common physical attacks. More than 25% of participants said either they or a member of their family experienced verbal harassment since September 11 with regard to their ethnicity. A devastatingly high 48% of Arab Americans in this study reported a high level of post-September 11 insecurity and uncertainty about their safety. When asked how to improve the situation, 21% said the greatest need is to get the American society as a whole to gain a more accurate understanding of them; 20% stated that uniting all Americans—be it Arab or any other ethnicity—is a pressing need to solve the tension; 16% argued that Arab Americans need a better voice in the media to demonstrate that not all are suspicious and terrorists.

Finally, a high 27% of participants want to keep the Arab culture alive. The numbers leave no room for misinterpretation, which makes the Arab American experience distinct from other white Americans. According to this study, it is a sense of understanding—not abolishing—the culture that will help bridge the all too clear gap between the traditional white race and the Arab American ethnic group.

Jamal & Naber (2008) examined this topic further, comparing and contrasting the Arab American experience pre and post September 11, referring to the group as “white but not quite.” They boast some of the only research that addresses the possibility for Arab Americans experiencing the treatment of a minority. In technical terms Arab Americans are grouped as white, but they argue that in everyday treatment the group is not necessarily treated as the majority. They explain that the “white” identity is not only in terms of phenotype, and that there can be individual differences in how Arab Americans self-identify. Although some do identify themselves as white, 31% of Arab Americans identify themselves as “other.” Among Muslim Arabs, the percentage is even higher: it is closer to 50%. Many opt for the “other” category because identifying as white assumes privilege, yet many people who technically classify as this group are not culturally accepted. Not only are they seen as “other,” but worse—as “enemy other”—and were viewed as suspicious, particularly after the terrorist attacks. Even within the Arab American ethnic group, there was still disagreement following September 11 on the consequences of classifying themselves as white. Some felt that it helped them to still be accepted as Americans and seem less threatening. Others, conversely, felt that acceptance was not the objective, and that they simply do not feel that they identify as white. Even the American legal system did not work in their favor, as many innocent Arab Americans

were viewed suspiciously in legal settings. Clearly, Arab Americans assume an ambiguous identity that is open to their self-identification as opposed to simply their phenotype.

Next, Ajrouch and Kusow (2007) examined two ethnic groups and how they are affected solely by the minority or majority label. Lebanese immigrants were considered white, while Somali immigrants were considered black and a visible minority. The researchers found that not only are race and religion critical, but the label of majority or minority status is similarly imperative to how groups identify themselves. It matters how they were viewed in their home country and how they will be viewed in their host country to determine what their likely self-perception will be. Lebanese Muslims embraced their white identity, because their minority status in their homeland made them especially keen on the newfound privileges of being the majority. This excitement about their new privileged identity leads to elevated feelings of self-worth and higher positive identities. Arab American whiteness research is undoubtedly complex, as their decision to consider themselves as “white” or “other” may be heavily correlated with their homeland status. Ajrouch and Kusow’s work in conjunction with Ajrouch and Jamal’s provide compelling arguments that their immigrant status, national origin, religious affiliation and perceived Arab Americanness all contribute to the self-identity an Arab American assumes.

On the US Census form, persons of Arab American or Middle Eastern descent do not have a separate category and are asked to check the “Not Hispanic, White” box. While some Arab Americans do identify racially as White, many do not. Although a small body of research exists on experiences specific to Arab Americans instead of white

Americans as a whole, most of the research on whiteness focuses on white persons in a broader sense without including the numerous people asked to check the “white” demographic box who reject that label, including 31% of Arab Americans. Studying how many Arab Americans self-identify racially, what they think about their racial identity, and how they feel about checking the “White” box are all topics that can be further investigated to develop the current literature.

### *The Present Investigation*

The current research aims to expand upon the extant literature and address the specific experiences of Arab Americans here at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. In particular, I will interview two students from Arab American backgrounds and see how and why they self-identify the way they do. Of particular interest are the factors that contribute to identifying as “white” or “other,” how their friends perceive them, and their involvements here on campus (see Appendix 1). All of these questions as they pertain to the University of Illinois have yet to be studied, and the findings could contribute to the small body of existing research on Arab American experiences and factors that make this very ambiguous group self-identify as “white” or “other.”

## **Method**

### **Participants**

In this pilot study, the participants are two white women who responded to an e-mail sent to the Arab American Student Association at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Both are juniors, one from Syria and the other from Iraq. The first two participants to respond to the e-mail were eligible demographically, and thus were scheduled for face-to-face interviews. No compensation was involved, but the



participants were enthusiastic about getting their experiences as Arab Americans surfaced in a study.

### **Interviewer Biases**

As the interviewer, I am a white female undergraduate junior in psychology here at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Having an Irish mother and Arab American father made me especially interested in my topic. I am enrolled in a course entitled *Whiteness and the University* and chose to learn about the self-identification and self-perceptions of Arab American students at this university for my pilot study. Although I was not sure how each would identify racially, I expected the participants to have negative views regarding other white Americans and socially remain with their ethnic group. I also expected them to experience somewhat of an uncomfortable culture shock when coming to the University of Illinois, since my previous experiences with my Arab American relatives suggest that they isolate themselves into a bubble and have little interaction with other white Americans. Thus, I thought coming to such a large university and breaking out of their comfort zone would cause hostile feelings toward white Americans who may exhibit biases toward the group, as shown in the September 11 research. To keep my biases in check, I asked very open-ended questions and encouraged the participants to interpret the questions how they would like, instead of using suggestive questioning to bring about biased responses.

### **Procedure**

I began with simple questions, such as their year and hometown, and then asked them what box they check for demographic purposes. I also asked them about their general experiences as a White/Arab American person at the University of Illinois. Then,

I asked their country of origin, when they moved here, and the traditions of their family. I also asked them to describe their friends, social life, and involvements here at the University of Illinois. I then asked them how they feel about Arab Americans who check the “White” box. These questions were developed through the help of the professor and my classmates, and I found that leaving a lot of room for elaboration gave me a better insight on their experiences than if I had asked closed-ended questions. Both interviews were conducted face-to-face in the interview room of my workplace, with prior consent. Each was audiotaped and lasted approximately 40 minutes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and all identifying information was removed.

### **Results**

To analyze my data, I highlighted key similarities in both interviews and used the quotes to confirm several themes. Three main themes were extracted from the interviews, including their racial self-identification, perceptions of Arabs who identify as “White,” and their ties to the Arab American community and culture.

I found that both of the participants self-identified to some degree as Arab American, although both struggled with the lack of a clear-cut box on demographic questionnaires such as the US Census Survey. The Iraqi participant, despite identifying herself as white, said, “On those standardized tests, they make you pick your ethnicity and there isn’t one for Arabs. I check ‘white’ but I just don’t feel like I fit into that category.” The Syrian participant said, “I check “Other” because even though I identify more as American, I know the Arab part of me is still there.” Thus, their racial self-identification and conflict when it comes to officially identifying themselves was a critical theme in both interviews.

Another main theme was perceptions of Arabs who identify as “white,” which, contrary to my original hypothesis, both participants had very positive feelings about. The Syrian participant who identified as “Other” said, “If they identify as white... more power to them! This country is full of great opportunities, so what’s wrong with identifying yourself as white?” The Iraqi participant said, “I think it’s important to know your culture and where you come from...but I think it’s okay to see themselves as white, especially if they spent most of their time here.” Such positive feelings toward Arab Americans who identify as white was a pleasantly surprising finding and very apparent theme in both interviews.

The third and final major theme found in both interviews was their ties to the Arab American community and culture. Again contradicting my original hypothesis, I had predicted an intense culture shock upon arriving at Illinois and a strong desire to stick with others in their ethnic group. Interestingly, I found that the Syrian participant did not want anything to do with Arabs when she got here, but ended up being very involved with that community on campus. She said, “When I first got here, I was sick of it all and didn’t want to be around any Arabs. But I ended up gravitating toward the Muslim Student Association.” The Iraqi participant, on the other hand, did not have much Arab exposure outside her home growing up, so was surprised to find most of her friends here belonging to that community. She said, “In high school, I didn’t really have any Arab friends, but here I spend most of my time with people who are Arab. I think there’s more exposure for me here than at home.” Clearly, both participants’ experiences, although different, contradicted my original prediction that they would have trouble adjusting to

the vast number of cultures here on campus. My past experiences with Arab American relatives and friends are thus not indicative of the ethnic group as a whole.

### **Discussion**

My study ultimately found that Arab Americans in Illinois, although with conflicting views regarding what to label themselves as racially, had positive perceptions of those who identify as white. This could be a result of their generally positive experiences at the school, since their loyal involvements to the Arab American community and culture have allowed them to find their niche.

My findings indicate that Arab Americans at Illinois have generally positive experiences, although they still exhibit some conflict when it comes down to actually identifying their race. Their strong sense of cultural identity and tendency to flock toward others in their Arab American community provides an alternate perspective to Pamela Perry's (2001) article which argues that "white" is essentially synonymous with "cultureless." According to my study, Arab Americans who are technically considered white, and even those who identify as such for demographic purposes, can still have strong ties to their culture, thus rivaling Perry's claim.

The findings also support Jamal and Naber's (2008) claims that Arab Americans are "white but not quite," and that many do identify as "other." Ajrouch and Jamal (2007) also argued that the immigrant status, national origin, religious affiliation and perceived Arab Americanness all contribute to how this group chooses to self-identify. My findings would agree, in that both mentioned their involvements in the Arab American community, Muslim affiliation, and parents' immigration stories as factors they strongly consider when trying to self-identify racially.

Based on the experiences of these participants, the University of Illinois is doing a wonderful job having Arab American students find their niche. The very established organizations, such as the Arab Students Association and the Muslim Students Association have proved very useful and are groups the university should continue to maintain and develop, as it makes it easy for such students to get involved in that community. One potential direction for future research is to do a perspective switch, and see how the Arab American community is viewed by white students of European descent. It would be interesting to see whether or not European whites group Arab Americans into their existing “white” schema. Also, some scholarship has analyzed the experience pre and post September 11 for those who identify as Arab American, and how the group is both differentiated and accepted. Future research could sample Arab Americans who identify as white and see how their experiences were before and after this tragedy. The literature regarding Arab Americans is still small enough that there are an endless number of ways to develop it.

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## Appendix 1

**Interview Questions\***

1. What year are you?
2. Where are you from?
3. I'm really interested in you and your identity, do you identify as Arab American or do you identify as white? Both? One or the other? There's no right or wrong answer here.
4. What is your experience like as a \_\_\_\_\_ at Illinois?
5. What country are your parents from?
6. When did they/you move here?
7. What are your family traditions like?
8. Now I want to ask you a little about your friends and your social life. Can you describe what that's like for you?
9. What organizations or involvements do you have? Tell me more about that. How did you get involved in that?
10. So, you identify as \_\_\_\_\_ if I'm hearing you right. Is that how your friends see you?
11. My understanding is that some Arab Americans do identify as white. How do you feel about that?
12. (If they say they're not close to their heritage): Tell me more about that, does that cause any conflicts?
13. Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't discussed?

\*Depending on their answers for each, I asked relevant questions depending on the direction they wanted to lead the conversation. The questions listed above were the ones consistent through both interviews.